

**C**harles Stewart Parnell, an Irish politician of the late 19th Century, once argued: "Why should Ireland be treated as a geographical fragment of England? It is not, it is a nation." More than 100 years later, and 84 years after the creation of the Irish Free State, his country is still ignored by many Brits seeking a holiday because it is so close to home.

So while thousands headed south to escape the first chills of the British winter, photographer Ian Dawson and I found ourselves travelling west to try out a sporty new Mercedes-Benz A-Class and discover the charms of one of Ireland's most scenic regions.

A fast ferry crossing from Holyhead to Dun Laoghaire takes less than two hours; another 200 minutes on the road sees you clear across Ireland and in Limerick, the Republic's third largest city. Situated at the

mouth of the Shannon, this was to be the starting point for our west coast tour aboard the powerful new Mercedes A 200 Turbo, taking in some of the most dramatic seascapes and landscapes that Ireland has to offer.

The new A 200 Turbo, available with three or five doors, is now the flagship of the A-Class range. Its sporty, turbocharged 2.0-litre engine - capable of hitting 62mph from a standstill in 7.5 seconds - ensured swift progress as we headed north-west via Ennis and Ennistimon to the coastal resort of Lahinch. Here you are rewarded with stunning views of one of the easternmost reaches of the Atlantic and bracing breezes which last made landfall more than 2,000 miles westward in America.

Around the bay, the tiny village of Liscannor was eerily quiet, the walled harbour empty of water, a handful of ☒

# West life

Empty roads and spectacular scenery made Ireland the perfect location for Richard Yarrow to test the latest addition to the Mercedes A-Class range. Photos Ian Dawson



■ You are never far from a pub on the west coast of Ireland or from the region's world famous oysters, glorified at an annual festival



boats grounded in the mud and the quayside stacked tight with lobster pots. Fishing and tourism are key industries here but neither was doing much business as we stopped to photograph the A 200 Turbo and admire its dynamic styling. AMG 18-inch five-spoke alloy wheels, low-profile tyres and lowered sports suspension all contribute to its powerful presence.

Liscannor is also home to Vaughans Anchor Inn, a renowned family-run hotel. Voted Pub of the Year 2006 by Georgina Campbell, the well-known Irish food and travel guide writer, it seemed the perfect place to stop for a plate of local oysters with lemon and Tabasco. As in many communities here, behind the bar doubles as the local shop, tins of Spam and John West pilchards rubbing shoulders with a dozen varieties of whiskey. Needless to say, the seafood was excellent.

We fired up the A 200 Turbo and travelled around the Hag's Head peninsular, arriving at one of Ireland's best-known natural landmarks, the Cliffs of Moher. Rising vertically 200 metres from the sea and running for five miles, they're a spectacular sight. Views of the sheer rock face - home to thousands of guillemots - and the isolated majesty of O'Brien's Tower, which silently watches over the waves

crashing below, are a few minutes' walk from the new visitor centre.

Heading north along twisty B-roads, the A-Class coped admirably with Ireland's traditionally poor road surfaces. Changing up and down the standard six-speed gearbox allowed us to make full use of the 'peppy' 193hp available, taking us to another of Mother Nature's creations. The Burren is a vast expanse of gently sloping low-level limestone pavement. It's a unique botanical environment with rare plants taking root in the crevices between the grey rocks. The road zigged and zagged its way across this inhospitable terrain, but the A 200 Turbo handled it all faultlessly, taking The Burren in its stride.

Day one had taken in some of County Clare's finest views, but as evening fell we crossed the border into Galway, and entered a city which is very definitely 'on the up'. There's much to see in Galway: the Latin Quarter with the tradesmen of Shop Street and Eyre Square, the pubs of Quay Street and the Spanish Arch, built to protect the harbour. A thriving trading post in times gone by, it has earned a reputation more recently as the high-tech capital of Ireland.

A sign of Galway's current status is the recently opened G Hotel, on the waterfront. Its Design Director is Philip Treacy, ☒

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The A-Class made light work of crossing The Burren's dramatic landscape and showed its sporting abilities on switchback cross-country forays